

Introduction

In previous chapters, we have been entering one of two basic types of data into each cell: numbers and text. However, we will not always know what the contents should be. Often the contents of one cell depends on the contents of other cells. To handle this situation, we use a third type of data: the formula. Formulas are equations using numbers and variables to get a result. In a spreadsheet, the variables are cell locations that hold the data needed for the equation to be completed.

A function is a predefined calculation entered in a cell to help you analyze or manipulate data. All you have to do is add the arguments, and the calculation is made automatically. Functions help you create the formulas needed to get the results that you are looking for.

Setting up a spreadsheet

If you are setting up more than a simple one-sheet system in Calc, it is worth planning ahead a little. Make sure to:

- Avoid typing fixed values into formulas
- Include documentation (notes and comments) describing what the system does, including what input is required and where the formulas come from (if not created from scratch)
- Incorporate a system of error-checking of formulas to verify that the formulas do what is intended

The trap of fixed values

Many users set up long and complex formulas with fixed values typed directly into the formula.

For example, conversion from one currency to another requires knowledge of the current conversion rate. If you input a formula in cell C1 of `=0.75*B1` (for example to calculate the value in Euros of the USD dollar amount in cell B1), you will have to edit the formula when the exchange rate changes from 0.75 to some other value. It is much easier to set up an input cell with the exchange rate and reference that cell in any formula needing the exchange rate. What-if type calculations are also simplified: what if the exchange rate varies from 0.75 to 0.70 or 0.80? No formula editing is needed and it is clear what rate is used in the calculations. Breaking complex formulas down into more manageable parts, described below, also helps to minimize errors and aid troubleshooting.

Lack of documentation

Lack of documentation is a very common point of failure. Many users prepare a simple sheet which then develops into something much more complicated over time. Without documentation, the original purpose and methodology is often unclear and difficult to decipher. In this case it is usually easier to start again from the beginning, wasting the work done previously. If you insert comments in cells, and use labels and headings, a spreadsheet can later be modified by you or others and much time and effort will be saved.

Error-checking formulas

Adding up columns of data or selections of cells from a sheet often results in errors due to omitting cells, wrongly specifying a range, or double-counting cells. It is useful to institute checks in your spreadsheets. For example, set up a spreadsheet to calculate columns of figures, and use SUM to calculate the individual column totals. You can check the result by including (in a non-printing column) a set of row totals and adding these together. The two values—row total and column total—must agree. If they do not, you have an error somewhere.